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Carving Out an Identity:

The *Monument aux Morts* in Republican Strasbourg

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements  
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in History

by

Andrew Christian Richter

Thesis Committee:  
Associate Professor Sarah Farmer, Chair  
Associate Professor Ian Coller  
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## **ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS**

Carving Out an Identity:

The *Monument aux Morts* in Republican Strasbourg

By

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Master of Arts in History

University of California, Irvine, 2019

Associate Professor Sarah Farmer, Chair

War memorials serve as powerful sites of memory, symbols around which collective identity is developed. Strasbourg's monument aux morts is no exception, yet in content it is unique among French monuments to the First World War. The monument aux morts depicts a mother mourning over her two dying sons, who fought on opposing sides of the conflict. My project addresses themes of commemoration, borderland identity, and public spectacle. It seeks to show how Strasbourg's unique geopolitical position, caught between the German Empire and the Third Republic, contributed to its public representation of its wartime experience. Moreover, drawing on the concept of invented tradition, I will posit that the monument's 1936 inauguration ceremony served the ritual function of symbolically integrating the citizens of Strasbourg into the French nation-state – a process which was negotiated between national center and periphery.

## INTRODUCTION

In the late evening of Saturday, October 17, 1936, Albert Lebrun, President of the French Republic, awaited an eastbound train at the Gare de l'Est in Paris' 10<sup>th</sup> arrondissement. The station, serving as the western terminus of the railway line connecting Paris to Strasbourg and Mulhouse, is rich with symbolism. Situated on the *place du 11-Novembre-1918* and bordered by the *rue d'Alsace* and *rue de Strasbourg*<sup>1</sup>, the Gare de l'Est is just as much of a symbolic link between the capital and Alsace as it is a geographic link.

Built in 1849 to aid the administrative and commercial ties between the capitals of France and the region of Alsace, the station also provides international train service into Luxembourg, Germany, and Austria. In fact, from 1883, the Gare de l'Est was the primary point of departure for the famous *Orient Express* connecting Western Europe to Istanbul. Yet as Lebrun boarded his train that night, he would have seen another legacy of this eastward-facing transportation hub displayed boldly in the great mural adorning its walls. In 1926 the American painter Albert Herter, whose son perished in the Great War, gave the mural *Le Départ des poilus, août 1914* – in English, *The Departure of the Infantrymen, August 1914* – to the station. The artwork, depicting families solemnly bidding farewell to their loved ones who were heading off to the front lines, acknowledges the Gare de l'Est's role as a site of mobilization for French troops. Many of these *poilus* would not live to see the return trip. Their family members, however, remain, and their identities as bereaved parents, widows, orphans, lovers, or friends are fundamentally shaped by the experience of loss and mourning.

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<sup>1</sup> Later re-named *rue du 8-Mai-1945* in honor of the ending of the Second World War



With an estimated 1.3 million Frenchmen killed in the Great War<sup>2</sup>, communities negotiated their regional and national identities through the collective memory of experienced loss. The memorialization of the war dead at the local level was in fact the purpose of Lebrun's journey. It may well have dawned on the President as he passed by Herter's mural that the young men it depicted resembled those whose memory would be publicly recognized the following day in Strasbourg for the unveiling of the *monument aux morts*.



Fig. 1, Herter, Albert. *Le Départ des poilus, août 1914, Gare de l'Est, Paris* (1926). Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Albert Lebrun's planned trip to Strasbourg to preside over the inauguration of the new memorial was previewed in the October 17<sup>th</sup> edition of *Le Temps*, France's primary newspaper of record in the pre-war era. The short article contained an appeal by Strasbourg's mayor, Charles Frey, bidding his fellow citizens to provide "a reception

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<sup>2</sup> Alexandre Lafon, "War Losses (France)," in: *1914-1918-Online International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, ed. by Ute Daniel, et al. (Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin, 2014).

worthy of the head of state and to deck their houses so that the image of the city reflects the solemn character of the day.”<sup>3</sup> The paper suggests that this appeal was already beginning to be heard; the tricolor flags were already draping the city’s buildings. As Lebrun began his eastward journey that night, he would find a Strasbourg connected to Paris and to the French nation not just by railways and administration but connected in patriotic spirit.

### **LET US PAY OUR DEBT**

On June 2, 1936 the committee for the *Monument aux morts* of Strasbourg published an appeal to the local population, asking for donations for the new war memorial to be built in the city’s Place de la République. Eighteen years after the First World War, the city had yet to erect a monument for the dead. This appeal stressed the need to immortalize the memory of those lost in the conflict as well as the need to give a site of mourning to those whose departed loved ones’ gravesites were inaccessible. Emphasizing the urgency of this project, the appeal frankly states, “Let us not wait any longer to pay our debt.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Le Temps* (Paris), October 17, 1936. Gallica.

<sup>4</sup> *La Tribune Juive* (Strasbourg), June 12, 1936. Gallica.

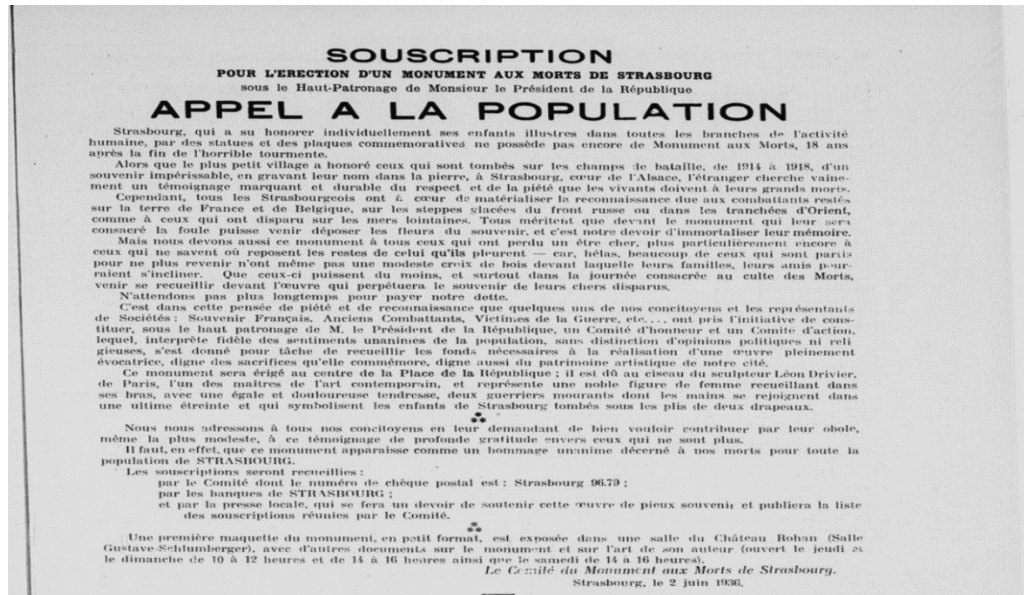


Fig. 2, Appeal to the population for donations toward the monument in Strasbourg from the June 12, 1936 issue of *La Tribune Juive*.

The committee for the *monument aux morts* in Strasbourg certainly had the fallen sons of their city in mind as they ventured to build a new memorial in their honor. Yet at the symbolic level it accomplished even more. By producing the monument in its particular fashion, commissioning an experienced propagandist sculptor to craft it, and symbolically placing it in an urban space with considerable history, the committee carved out a republican identity for the citizens of Strasbourg.

The monument's construction and the ceremony of its unveiling in October 1936 served the task of symbolically integrating the ethnically and religiously heterogeneous population of Strasbourg into the Third French Republic. Drawing upon themes of material culture, ritual, and nation-building, I assert that the committee crafted a republican vision of Strasbourgeois identity out of the motifs of the city's diverse history and communicated this vision aesthetically through the public display of the monument. In addition, I claim that the inauguration ceremony, which involved both popular participation and the

involvement of functionaries of the national government, displays the broad acceptance of this project among the populace. Nearly two decades after re-joining the French state, the unveiling of the monument represented the culmination of Strasbourg's process of reconciliation with the nation-state. This identity was consummated and displayed to the world through the ritual performance of its inauguration ceremony that. With the participation of national and local elites through public speeches and ceremonial processions, and with the participation of the popular classes through simple yet meaningful acts like decorating houses with tricolor bunting and flags, we see the invention of Republican Strasbourg.

To make this argument, this paper will take the following trajectory. First, I will provide an overview of Alsace's geopolitical history in order to situate the monument in its historic context. Next, I will discuss the work of historians whose methodologies contributed to my analysis before analyzing the *monument aux morts* itself in sections on its form, creation, and location. From there the paper will describe the inauguration ceremony of October 1936 to demonstrate the ritual nature of the festivities, followed by a survey of the media coverage of the event to show the near-unanimous acclaim it received across the political spectrum. Finally, I will use election data to argue that the monument brought together Strasbourg and the Republic by appealing to common values distinct from the agendas of ruling political parties.

## ALSACE'S PLACE IN THE NATION

In order to understand the significance of this monument, we must acknowledge the complex historical position of Alsace inside the French nation-state. The image of a centralized form of French cultural nationalism imposed on France's constituent regions from above pervaded historiography for much of the twentieth century. Yet scholarship in the past thirty years has called this into question, allowing us to look at the peripheral regions of France not as subjects of Parisian centralization, but as real contributors to the cultural life of the French nation-state.

The symbol of France as the Hexagon has its origins in the mid-nineteenth century, but as Peter Sahlin points out, it did not gain its cultural currency until looming decolonization threatened to delimit France to its European foothold in the 1950s.<sup>5</sup> In fact, the geographic range of the French nation's territorial limits has been historically fluid. Perhaps no area exemplifies this fluidity more cogently than metropolitan France's easternmost region, Alsace.

Holding a complicated geopolitical history, Alsace is nestled along the border between France and Germany. After centuries of rule by vassals of the Holy Roman Empire, the Germanic dialect-speaking bishoprics and counties making up the region were gradually transferred to French administration after the Thirty Years' War. Louis XIV received the rural counties of Alsace in the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia and slowly consolidated control of the region, capped off by his annexation of the main city of

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<sup>5</sup> Peter Sahlin, "Natural Frontiers Revisited: France's Boundaries since the Seventeenth Century," *American Historical Review*, Vol. 95 No. 5 (1990)

Strasbourg in 1681. To justify his acquisition and to pave the way for the acceptance of the integration of the province into his state, the King and Cardinal Richelieu invoked the image of the historic borders of the tribes of Gaul as extending to the Rhine.<sup>6</sup>

Alsace remained part of the French state through the turbulence of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries but found itself caught between competing European powers in the latter half of the nineteenth century. In the aftermath of the 1870 Franco-Prussian War, Alsace and the northern departments of Lorraine were annexed by the nascent German Empire, which appealed to the Germanic heritage and dialect of the region as their justification for annexation.

The newly established Third Republic in France rallied around the ideology of *revanche* – the political position driven by the desire to recover the provinces lost in the Franco-Prussian War – a notion shared by U.S. President Woodrow Wilson in his *Fourteen Points* speech of 1918. Point 8 read, “The wrong done to France by Prussia in 1871 in the matter of Alsace-Lorraine, which has unsettled the peace of the world for nearly fifty years, should be righted, in order that peace may once more be made secure in the interest of all.”<sup>7</sup> As such, when the victors met at Versailles after the conclusion of the First World War, the lost provinces were returned to France.

But how would the Alsatians fit in with the French Republic? After all, they had been a member of the German Empire for nearly fifty years and had been under the Second French Empire for two decades before that. Ethnically, linguistically, socially, and religiously heterogeneous, how would the citizens of the region take to the secular

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Woodrow Wilson, “President Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points”, Address to Congress, January 8, 1918.

bourgeois republicanism that France had to offer? And on the other side of the coin, how would the Republic accept its recovered provinces? These were the questions being addressed by local officials like the members of the Strasbourg monument committee when they moved to impart a particular Strasbourgeois republican identity on the city. This identity is communicated not only through the sculpture itself, but through ritual practices.

### **RITUAL AS THE NEXUS OF NATION-BUILDING**

Rituals serve to inscribe collective values in the public sphere, as demonstrated by Eric Hobsbawm, Terence Ranger, et al. in *The Invention of Tradition*. Ceremonial forms such as parades, coronations, and inaugurations elicit mass participation, appeal to history, and foster a feeling of common belonging among the audience. They rely on invented traditions, which Hobsbawm defines as “a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past.”<sup>8</sup> War memorials have the added dimension of being sites of ritual collective mourning, bringing communities together after traumatic ruptures. They become particularly strong vessels of meaning due to the multiple layers they work upon as bearers of historical remembrance. In his 2006 work *Remembering War*, Jay Winter describes the “discursive field” that is historical remembrance:

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<sup>8</sup> E. J. Hobsbawm and T. O. Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). 1.

It differs from family remembrance by its capacity to unite people who have no other bonds drawing them together. It is distinctive from liturgical remembrance in being freed from a preordained religious calendar and sanctified ritual forms. And yet historical remembrance has something of the familial and something of the sacred in it. When all three are fused, as in some powerful war memorials—Maya Lin’s Vietnam memorial in Washington comes to mind—historical remembrance is a phenomenon of enduring power.<sup>9</sup>

Due to this fusion of the familial and the sacred, war memorials become perfect sites around which to display the collective identity of a community. The rituals surrounding these objects therefore have considerable gravity, and it is precisely there that Strasbourg’s monument committee was able to communicate its self-image to its citizens and to the rest of the nation.

While Hobsbawm argues that rituals are more often enacted by the nation-state to build national sentiment in their populace in a top-down manner, this paper will show that in this case, the committee used the ceremonial form of a republican spectacle to build cultural links between Strasbourg and the nation. The central object of commemoration and the referent to all ceremony was the monument, which was both local and national in its symbolism. Therefore, my argument will show the inauguration ceremony of October 18, 1936 as a culmination of the negotiation between core and periphery over the place of Strasbourg in the greater French Third Republic.

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<sup>9</sup> J. M. Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War and Historical Memory in the 20th Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006). 11.



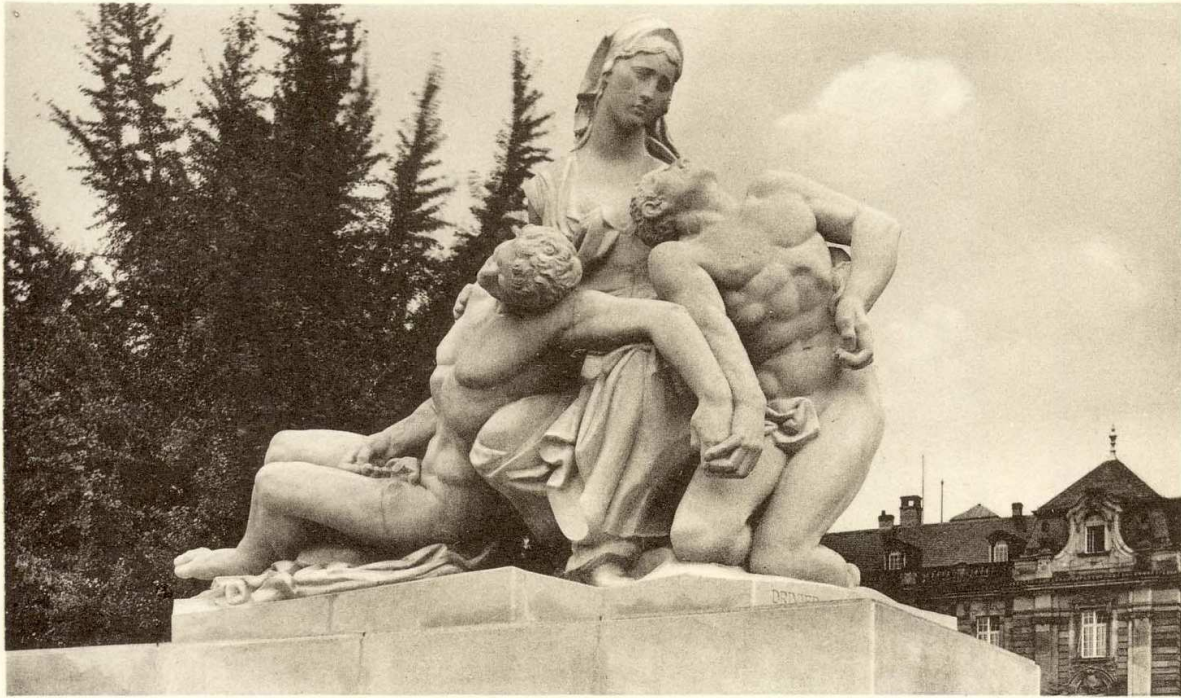
I use the term “negotiation” in an informal sense, referring to the dialectical conflicts between the interests of the national government and of the local elites, which produce tacit cultural agreements. This theme also extends to relations between elites and popular classes, with the moral economy needing to be upheld to ensure the success of this cultural project. In the end, Strasbourg’s monument had to take a form that would be accepted by its Francophone and Alsatian dialect-speaking residents, its Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and irreligious populations, its bourgeois and working classes, and its disparate political parties. The successful unfolding of the inauguration ceremonies demonstrates that the monument’s symbolic message was accepted by a cross-section of the Strasbourg population. Furthermore, the national media coverage of the event, shows that the ceremony and the statue proved satisfactory to republicans throughout France.

### **THE *MONUMENT AUX MORTS***

The scene depicted in the sculpture reflects both the unique cultural position of Strasbourg and the city’s wartime experience. It is a variant of a *pietà*<sup>10</sup> composed of three figures, a mother and two sons. Beneath the figures is an inscription on the plinth saying simply *à nos morts, 1914-1918* – which in English means *To Our Dead, 1914-1918*.

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<sup>10</sup> A *pietà* is a traditional artistic motif of maternal sacrifice and mourning with origins in the image of the Virgin Mary holding the dead body of Jesus. As such, it carries some religious connotations, yet was commonly adapted in contemporary art for metaphorical uses. Thus, it was not an image that would trouble Strasbourg’s non-Catholic population by any means.



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale et universitaire de Strasbourg

*Fig. 3, Monument aux morts, Place de la République. Strasbourg. Source: Gallica.*

Given the location of Strasbourg and the complex history of the previous half-century in Alsace, the implication of this scene is that one son died fighting for France, while the other died fighting for Germany. The grieving mother in the sculpture can be interpreted as representing Strasbourg itself, playing the role of a passive victim in the war, losing her children because of greater geopolitical forces outside of her control.

The mother, depicted in traditional dress, features a solemn face and hair covered by a veil, reflecting her mourning. The two dying brothers show expressions of pain and grief on their faces. Their bodies are contorted in opposite directions, yet their hands touch. They are depicted nude, which is an important symbolic decision. Their nudity displays the common humanity beneath the uniforms that separate them.

This interpretation was given in a speech at the inauguration ceremony by the former deputy mayor of Strasbourg and the chair of the monument's action committee, Henry Lévy. He posited that "the pain reflected by this beautiful figure of a woman symbolizes not only the homeland, but also symbolizes a wounded humanity." Lévy described the men in the sculpture as "two dying warriors, fallen under the folds of two flags, but, whose hands are seeking each other to unite in a supreme embrace."<sup>11</sup> Rather than having heroes and villains, the monument displays the two combatants as brothers trying to reunite before they perish.

Jay Winter has written that, "[i]n France, a visitor to any major town or village will encounter a *monument aux morts*."<sup>12</sup> Yet Strasbourg's version is rather unique compared to other French memorials to the Great War. Scholars like Winter, Pierre Nora, and Antoine Prost point out that most French monuments – for example the memorial of Hartmannswillerkopf in southern Alsace – were triumphalist, playing upon such ideals as duty, honor, and heroism. These themes are not visible in the Strasbourg monument, which functions, in fact, as one of a minority of French war memorials with a distinctly pacifist message. The monument uses gender in different ways as well. Where other memorials make use of masculine traits and military dress – even for composite female figures representing the nation like *Marianne* – the central figure in Strasbourg's monument is distinctly maternal and the two male figures are divested of their belligerent uniforms and their weapons. Even its epigraph conveys a pacifist message. It does not claim to be a memorial to the heroes of the war or to those who died for the *patrie* – the fatherland – but

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<sup>11</sup> *Le Temps* (Paris), October 19, 1936. Gallica.

<sup>12</sup> J. M. Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 78.

simply “to *our* dead,” reflecting the Alsatian casualties under the French and German armies, as well as the civilians who fell victim to wartime privations.<sup>13</sup>

One might presume that this monument, as a Strabourgeois expression of attachment to their wartime exceptionality and rejection of patriotic triumphalism, could hinder the city’s reconciliation with the national elites. My argument, however, is that this monument was central to the very process of reconciliation. It was the participation of state dignitaries in the ritual spectacle of the inauguration which symbolically consummated the cultural integration of Strasbourg into the French Third Republic after being re-attached to the state upon the conclusion of the war.

## **THE MEN AND MATERIALS OF THE MONUMENT**

Who were the individuals behind the construction of the *monument aux morts* and how can their backgrounds inform us of the overall purpose of the memorial? The aforementioned appeal for donations from June 2<sup>nd</sup> provides a comprehensive list of the committee’s members. As mentioned above, the action committee was led by Henry Lévy, a politician and businessman from Strasbourg’s Jewish community. His Jewish background gave him a unique perspective from which to help propose a common identity for the city, but as we will see, his heritage would be invoked by critics of the inauguration ceremony as a means of discrediting the event. Meanwhile, the action committee’s two Vice Presidents represented French patriotic organizations. General d’Armau de Pouydraguin was also the

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<sup>13</sup> Though Alsace was not as ravaged by the war as the Somme or Verdun, the Battle of Frontiers in August 1914 saw mobilization throughout the region, including Strasbourg, and armed engagements near Saverne to the northwest and Mulhouse to the south.

president of *Le Souvenir Français*, an organization founded in the 1870s with the mission of preserving French memory in Alsace-Lorraine through the sponsorship and maintenance of memorials and tombs. Alfred Bauer represented the National Union of Combatants, a nationalist veterans' association. These two representatives of their organizations having such a high position in the action committee implies that this project has patriotic undertones. Lesser members of the action committee included representatives from organizations for veteran Zouaves<sup>14</sup>, former prisoners of war, war widows, and disabled veterans. Civilians involved on the committee included a lawyer, a doctor, and the city's chief architect. The men and women charged with creating the monument were undoubtedly patriotic yet came from diverse backgrounds. The image that they crafted for the monument would be strongly informed by their social positions.

We can also read the goals of the organization through the individuals who were part of its honorary committee. Much of it was comprised of local politicians, including the prefect of the Bas-Rhin department, the mayor of Strasbourg, the military governor of Alsace, and several counsellors of state. The honorary committee also included members of Strasbourg's diverse ecumenical community. The city's Catholic Archbishop, President of the Lutheran Directory, President of the Synod of Reformed (Calvinist) Churches, and Grand Rabbi of the Jewish community were all included, alongside lesser clergy. Finally, heads of the chambers of commerce, agriculture, and veterans' affairs formed part of this honorary committee. The presence of all these names on the committee's list indicates the

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<sup>14</sup> Zouaves were the corps which served in North Africa during the war; in fact, a large proportion of Alsatian and Lorrainer volunteers for the French Army were sent to these corps as to avoid the potential for desertion if they were to potentially fight Alsatians from the German side on the Western Front.

effort to create a monument which would be acceptable across the broad spectrum of political, religious, and social blocs in interwar Strasbourg.

The subheading of the appeal declares the memorial's committee to be "under the high patronage of the President of the Republic."<sup>15</sup> Though the members were largely local and represent diverse backgrounds, there can be no question that the project was patriotic in scope and supported by Paris. Reflecting this, the committee turned to a sculptor who had a background in patriotic pieces.

Strasbourg's memorial committee commissioned the fifty-seven-year-old artist Léon-Ernest Drivier to compose the work. A native of Grenoble, in the French Alps, Drivier attended the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris and began his career as an assistant in the workshop of the great nineteenth-century impressionist sculptor Auguste Rodin. Through this working relationship with Rodin, Drivier "came to understand the importance of dynamism and of personal expression in sculpture."<sup>16</sup> He became part of an informal group of sculptors known as the *Bande à Schnegg*<sup>17</sup>, comprised of former students of Rodin who retained their master's naturalism and emphasis on the human form, but eschewed Rodin's extreme emotionalism and instead opted for a simpler neoclassicism.

Being selected as sculptor of the Strasbourg monument was not an exceptional experience for Drivier. In the 1930s he was relied upon frequently for state commissions for public statuary. John Zarobell, an art historian and former assistant curator of Philadelphia's Rodin Museum, wrote that Drivier's public commissions "took on a double

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<sup>15</sup> *La Tribune Juive* (Strasbourg), June 12, 1936. Gallica.

<sup>16</sup> John Zarobell, *Léon-Ernest Drivier 1878-1951* (Greenwich CT: Greenwich Gallery). Exhibition catalogue.

<sup>17</sup> "Schnegg Band", named after the brothers Gaston and Lucien Schnegg, who were key members of the group

goal of realizing French national ambitions through art on a monumental scale and of diffusing the overt political dimension of these events.”<sup>18</sup> Drivier’s most famous projects of the decade were commissioned pieces for two World’s Fairs held in Paris – the 1931 Colonial Exposition and the 1937 Universal Exposition. For the latter, he sculpted what is regarded as his masterpiece, the neoclassical *La Joie de Vivre* in the Trocadero Gardens at the base of the Eiffel Tower. What this shows is that Drivier was often commissioned by state officials to advance the project of nation-building through public aesthetics. His *monument aux morts* for Strasbourg may have been quite different in content from his Parisian public works, but it became a site where Strasbourg’s place in the nation was shaped through the participation of local and national voices in its unveiling. Drivier does not appear to have been present at the inauguration ceremony in October, with *Le Figaro* reporting that he was finishing up the carving in early September.<sup>19</sup>

The source of the sculpture’s material broke with local tradition. Rather than using stone from the Vosges mountains of Alsace, the committee purchased a slab of limestone from the quarries of Euville, fifty kilometers west of Nancy in Lorraine. While one could make the claim that this choice symbolically linked Alsace with the neighboring regions of France, its reason is more pragmatic. In describing the monument, the correspondent of *Le Temps* rejoiced that the city had “for once renounced the sandstone of the Vosges which holds up less well and disintegrates too easily under the effect of frost.”<sup>20</sup> The limestone from the Meuse valley would make for a more durable monument in the Alsatian climate.

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<sup>18</sup> Zarobell.

<sup>19</sup> *Le Figaro* (Paris), September 1, 1936. Gallica.

<sup>20</sup> *Le Temps* (Paris), October 19, 1936. Gallica.



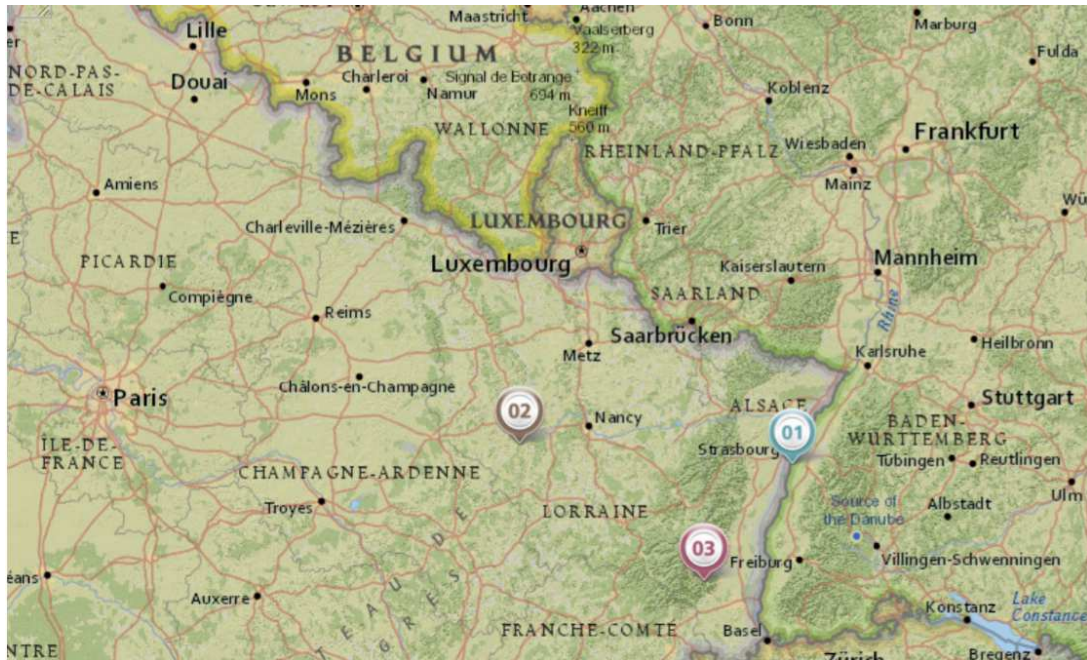


Fig. 4, Map showing location of (01) Strasbourg, (02) Euville, and (03) the Vosges in northeastern France

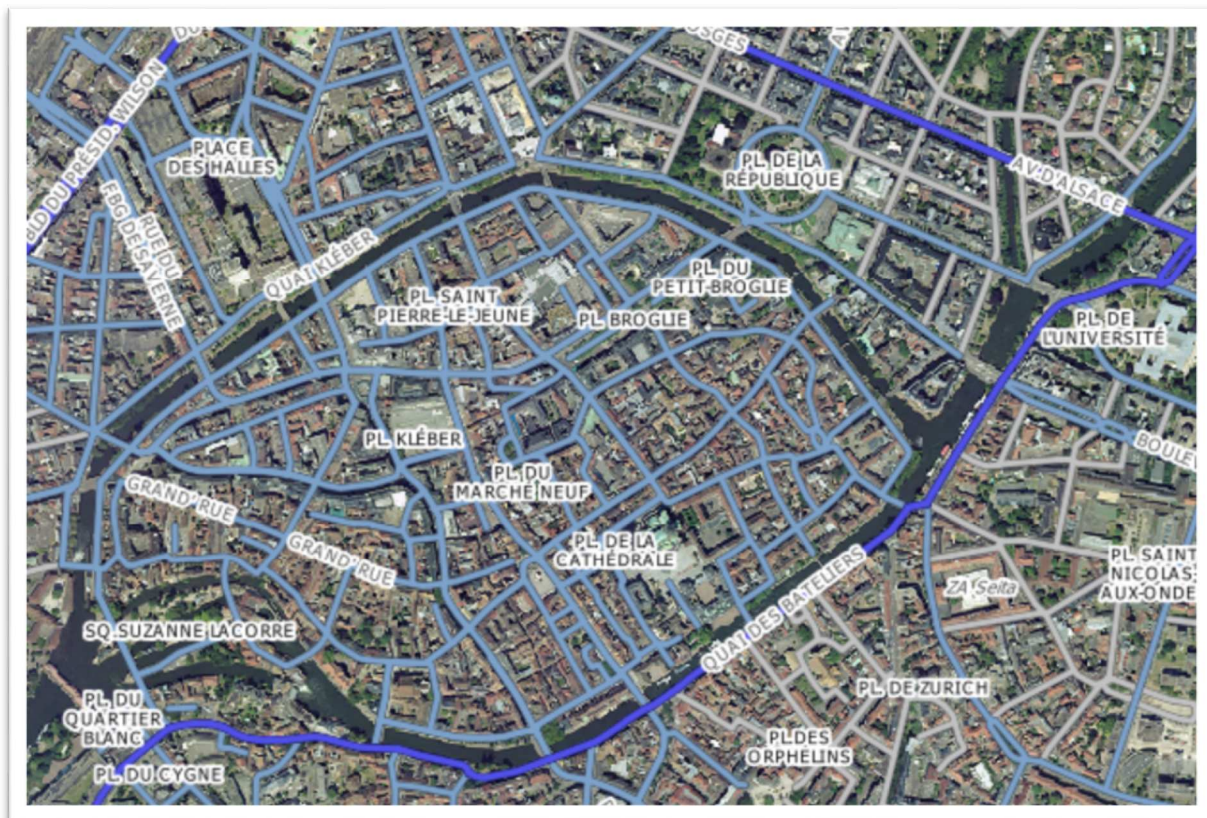
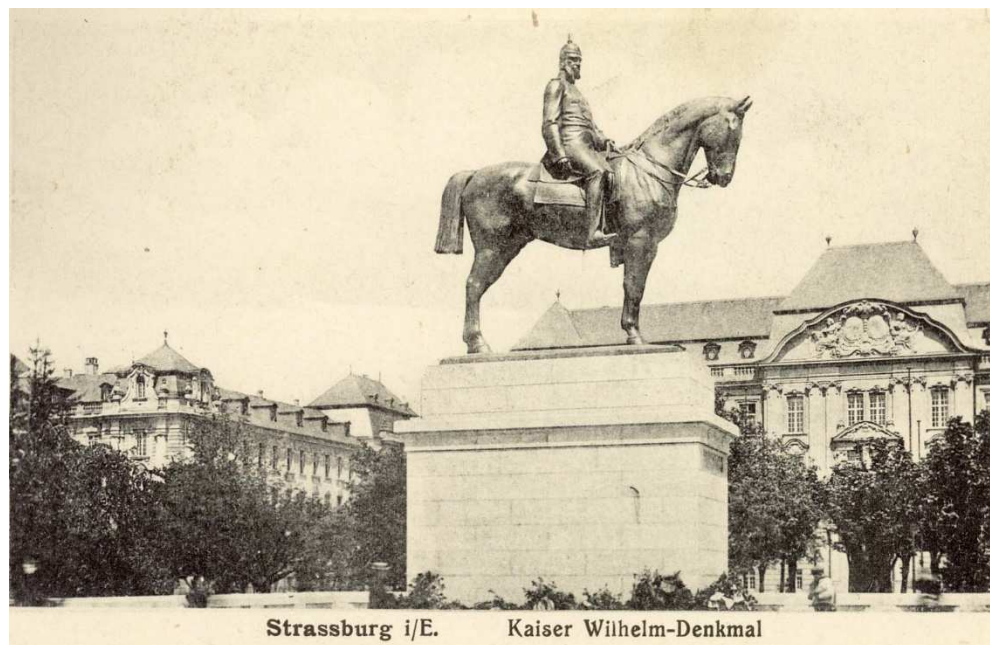


Fig. 5, City Map of Strasbourg. Monument is in the Place de la République in the north-center of image



The location of the statue within Strasbourg has symbolic cachet as well. The *Place de la République* was constructed by the Germans in the 1880s after annexing the city during the Franco-Prussian War. German authorities engaged in a large urban design project, removing the city's fortifications and developing the open land into public space. This district, called the Neustadt, was a symbolic attempt to inscribe German identity into the aesthetics of the city. The buildings installed in the Neustadt district made use of the Neo-Renaissance style common in Berlin. The architectural historicism not only linked Strasbourg aesthetically to the Prussian capital but constructed a sense of the permanence of that linkage through Germanic forms. The great public square in the district was named *der Kaiserplatz* and capped off by a monument of Kaiser Wilhelm I on horseback.



*Fig. 6, Kaiserplatz before 1918, Monument to Wilhelm I on the location now occupied by the Monument aux morts. Source: Wikimedia Commons.*

After the war, a group of citizens toppled this symbol of German imperialism. According to the newspaper *L'Intransigéant*, these unnamed vandals intended to dump the Wilhelm statue into the River Ill, but the metal proved too heavy to carry.<sup>21</sup> To place the new *monument aux morts* on the very spot where a statue of the first German Emperor once stood shows that the committee consciously understood the relationships between public aesthetics, sovereignty, and identity.

The *monument aux morts* is testament to how Strasbourg's diversity was used to impart republican identity. Although the content of the statue resists traditional nationalistic categories, it is not incompatible with French republicanism. In fact, it represents a new image of republicanism that integrates local identities into its whole. By depicting the city as a mother who lost sons on both sides of the war, the monument rejects patriotic or nationalist tropes and alludes to the city's cultural heterogeneity. However, to build it, the committee appealed to a sculptor who was known for his work in the French project of nation-building through the arts. Using the limestone from Euville not only spoke to connections with the neighboring province, but it also made for a more lasting expression of local identity through its durability. Finally, installing the monument in the place where Kaiser Wilhelm I's statue once stood asserts the rejection of imperial German identity in the public sphere for that of French republicanism.

This identity needed to be ceremonially expressed to invent the tradition of a republican Strasbourg. The participation of national figures in its inauguration ceremony signifies the assent of the nation-state toward Strasbourg's regional exceptionalism in the

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<sup>21</sup> *L'Intransigéant* (Paris), October 19, 1936. Gallica.

process of culturally reintegrating the city into the Republic. The accord of the local and national voices in this process is solidified in the use of ritual focused upon this monument.

## **THE RITUAL PERFORMANCE OF REPUBLICANISM**

According to a special correspondent of *Le Temps*, President Albert Lebrun received a “truly triumphant welcome” upon arriving in Strasbourg in the morning hours of Sunday, October 18<sup>th</sup>.<sup>22</sup> Accompanying Lebrun on his voyage were Henri Sellier, the minister of public health, François de Tesson, the undersecretary of state in charge of the affairs of Alsace and Lorraine, André Magre, his general secretary, and General Joseph-Eugène Charles Braconnier, as well as a few other officers and plenipotentiaries.

This ceremony took the form of a pilgrimage through the city, stopping at the city hall, prefecture building, chamber of commerce, and a hospital. Military parades and choirs added to the spectacle of the day. Local girls were present to present Lebrun with floral bouquets, which he accepted as he embraced them with kisses on the cheek. At the city hall, the President was welcomed by mayor Charles Frey, whose words reflected the general sentiment of national-regional cooperation. Frey proclaimed, “despite the current [economic] difficulties [from the worldwide financial crisis], the population of Strasbourg retains its confidence in France’s destiny, which is its own.” In response, Lebrun declared, “I would be particularly honored if the passage of the head-of-state through your city could be an occasion of rapprochement for the citizens...in a common will of devotion to the *patrie*, of civil concord and social peace.”<sup>23</sup> After a stop at the prefecture building, the

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<sup>22</sup> *Le Temps* (Paris), October 19, 1936. Gallica.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

delegation proceeded a hundred meters into the public gardens of the Place de la République, where the new statue was set to be revealed.



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

*Fig. 7, Inauguration of the monument aux morts de Strasbourg : speech of M. de Tesson : [photographie de presse] / Agence Meurisse. Source: Gallica.*

After Lebrun completed his speech, he laid a bouquet of flowers at the feet of the statue. He bowed down as funeral bells tolled and the spectators observed a minute of silence. This act underscores the solemn nature of the ritual. By observing this moment of silence, the observers partake in the communal act of commemoration.

Michel Walter, the leading member of the Bas Rhin's departmental council, gave a short toast at that evening's banquet in which he likened Lebrun's presence at the day's ceremony to "a symbolic gesture of all of France meditating upon the memory of the

dead.”<sup>24</sup> Lebrun in turn told the banqueting businessmen of Alsace that “in all domains, material, intellectual, and moral,” France would “support its dear Alsace.” The head of state cited his visitation and presence among them as the best guarantee of that promise. He closed his toast claiming, “I lift my glass to the honor of the city of Strasbourg, magnificent hearth of French civilization on the edge of the Rhine, to Alsace, loving and devoted daughter of the affectionate *grande patrie*, and above all, to France and to the Republic.”<sup>25</sup> The toast, linking the fortunes and destinies of Alsace and the French Republic, was met with heartfelt applause from the attendees. Upon leaving the city, Lebrun handed over to the mayor the sum of 5,000 francs as alms for the city’s poor, again showing commitment to the rapport between the nation and the city.<sup>26</sup> His return train was welcomed by a delegation of functionaries at the Gare de l’Est at 10:40 PM. The arrival also attracted “an important gathering of persons who came expressly to give a warm ovation to M. Albert Lebrun.”<sup>27</sup>

The adulation that the President felt in both cities displays the symbolic success of his mission. The ritual process of inaugurating a war memorial strengthened bonds between the nation and the region. In creating a new monument to mourn their dead, the Strasbourgeois marked their communal identity on their terms. Navigating between their subjective experiences as Alsatians and Frenchmen, they worked out new configurations of national and regional sentiment. The presence of the French head of state in the grand spectacle of the ceremonies of October 18<sup>th</sup> consummated this rapport between metropole

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<sup>24</sup> *Le Temps* (Paris), October 19, 1936. Gallica.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Le Temps* (Paris), October 22, 1936. Gallica.

<sup>27</sup> *Le Temps* (Paris), October 20, 1936. Gallica.

and periphery. The participation of Republican dignitaries in the inauguration of the monument shows us that the dynamics of identity building are working in multiple directions. We are not strictly left with an Alsatian region swallowed up by a French national core, but an Alsace that is embracing a French Republic whose overall character is colored by contributions from all its constituent parts.

## CONTEMPORARY RESPONSES

To fully understand the ritual effect of the October 18<sup>th</sup> unveiling of the *monument aux morts*, it is necessary to show how the ceremony was received. In this section, I will be using first-hand newspaper accounts to discern the tone of the reporters covering the event and the overall reception by the crowds present at the Place de la République. The diversity of the perspectives that these various national papers held reflects the many positions that individuals could hold on the matter. Locating commonalities in the coverage by outlets on all sides of the political spectrum, I contend that the event must be considered a success in its role of strengthening common bonds in the city and between the city and nation. The reactions to the inauguration ceremony within the French press were generally positive. Newspapers from the left, center, and right had nearly universal acclaim for the spectacle, commenting on the enthusiastic reception from the crowds and interpreting the ceremony in a favorable manner.

What did it mean to be left, right, or centrist in France in 1936? There are a few nuances to the matter. At this point, the legislature was dominated by a Popular Front government. This coalition was made up of the center-left Socialist Party (SFIO) of Prime Minister Léon Blum, which was socially liberal and championed the rights of labor unions,

the centrist Radical Party of Édouard Daladier (PRRRS<sup>28</sup>), which was anti-clerical yet respected private property, and the leftist French Communist Party (PCF) of Maurice Thorez which supported a Stalinist line of building socialism in one country. Opposition to the Popular Front came from the Republican Alliance, a center-right party which favored decentralized government and wanted to preserve the Catholic Church's role in the state. On the far-right were a modest but loud number of nationalist and anti-Republican paramilitary leagues which were in the process of being suppressed by the Popular Front government in the aftermath of a 1934 manifestation that nearly turned into a right-wing coup d'état. To get a sense of how individuals from each of these political positions would have responded to the *monument aux morts* in Strasbourg, we can analyze the reactions from the newspapers which catered to their bases.

The centrist newspaper of record *Le Temps* emphasized the crowd's approval. It describes the triumphal jubilation of the citizens as Lebrun arrived in the city, as well as the endless rows of people who came to salute the President as he kneeled before the monument. The paper emphasizes the grand appeal of the event, noting that "Alsatian townsfolk and peasants...left their villages and their farms" to see the "head of state who came to visit them."<sup>29</sup>

*Le Petit Parisien*, the politically unaligned popular newspaper that at that time claimed the largest circulation for a daily paper in the world, boasted the headline, "Strasbourg has unanimously given President Albert Lebrun an enthusiastic welcome."<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Their full name was the *Republican, Radical, and Radical-Socialist Party*, though they are more commonly referred to as the Radicals.

<sup>29</sup> *Le Temps* (Paris), October 19, 1936. Gallica.

<sup>30</sup> *Le Petit Parisien* (Paris), October 19, 1936. Gallica.

Referring to October 18<sup>th</sup> as “the beautiful, unforgettable day,” *Le Petit Parisien*’s coverage was fervid. The success of the day’s ritual was confirmed by the paper’s correspondent, who said, “The visit of the President of the Republic to Strasbourg has more strongly cemented the reciprocal love of France and Alsace.”<sup>31</sup> The occasion was so positive that the paper insisted that “only the sky...remained obstinately gray,”<sup>32</sup> referring to the overcast weather. *Le Petit Parisien* showed itself to be concerned with Strasbourg’s Frenchness. It insisted that the population indicated that they would “passionately, with every fiber of their being, remain French,”<sup>33</sup> and that they had made “an act of faith” toward France and the Republic that day.<sup>34</sup> The ceremony in Strasbourg was also the front-page headline in *Le Figaro*, a national paper with center-right leanings. This paper also painted a picture of the complete support of the community for the event and the President’s presence. “The applause” to Lebrun’s speech displayed “the unanimous approbation of the Alsatian people.”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> *Le Figaro* (Paris), October 19, 1936. Gallica.





Fig. 8, *Le Petit Parisien* front page, October 19, 1936.

France's conservative media outlets also played up the success of the day. This is noteworthy because, as I will show later, the right constituted Alsace's largest voting base in the 1936 legislative elections. *Le Matin*, a Parisian daily with nationalist and anti-communist leanings, mentioned in their lede that "the Alsatian population showed by its acclamations toward M. Albert Lebrun its affectionate attachment to its French brothers."<sup>36</sup> It emphasizes Alsace's attachment to the Republic, which "neither the perfidious campaigns of our enemies nor the errors committed sometimes can estrange from the hearts of our reunited brethren."<sup>37</sup>

<sup>36</sup> *Le Matin* (Paris), October 19, 1936. Gallica.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

The Catholic journal *La Croix* viewed the proceedings from a conservative perspective. As defenders of the Church in an increasingly secular Third Republic, *La Croix* was the only paper to mention the clerical participation in the ceremony. It notes that the city's Catholics, led by Bishop Charles Ruch, formally proceeded to the Place de la République after leaving a High Mass.<sup>38</sup> *La Croix's* coverage of the day was as positive as that of the other publications, noting in its headline that Strasbourg had embraced "its will to order and peace" in the cult of the dead.<sup>39</sup> It also noted that it had been some time since Alsace "had known a comparable gathering, a comparable atmosphere....that is to say that the city was like a tricolor bouquet,"<sup>40</sup> referencing the tricolor French flag that was waving everywhere. The right and center both saw positive outcomes in their coverage of Strasbourg's festivities, but what about interwar France's strong left movement?

Curiously enough, the leftists had a favorable opinion of the ceremonies as well. The journalistic mouthpiece of the French Communist Party, *L'Humanité*, claimed in its headline that the speeches of the day "will disappoint the hopes of adversaries of the Republic."<sup>41</sup> The PCF, it should be noted, were not as radically revolutionary as communist parties elsewhere in Europe in 1936. They were content to work within the Republican system, serving in parliamentary coalitions on an off-and-on basis in the first half of the twentieth century. Moreover, the Alsatian working class showed considerable support to communist deputies, as will be shown later.

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<sup>38</sup> A High Mass being a more elaborate and ceremonial form of the liturgy, completely sung or chanted by the clergy, as opposed to the more common Low Mass.

<sup>39</sup> *La Croix* (Paris), October 20, 1936. Gallica.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> *L'Humanité* (Paris), October 19, 1936. Gallica.



Fig. 9, *L'Humanité* front page, October 19, 1936.

Though Albert Lebrun was a member of the centrist Radical Party, the president's speech was lauded by the editors of *L'Humanité* for his call to respect the rule of law and existing commitments, which they interpreted as a "severe warning to certain factious employers,"<sup>42</sup> – a reproach toward business owners who exploited labor and reneged on bargaining agreements. Whether left, right, or center, nearly every publication reveled in the success of the monument's unveiling and the strengthened linkage between the citizens

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

of Strasbourg and the French Republic. But who were those “adversaries of the Republic” who the communist writers suggested would be disappointed by the ceremony?

We can see this as a reference to France’s controversial yet popular far-right movement, *Action Française*. Their newspaper, edited by the integral nationalist demagogue and poet Charles Maurras, was the lone daily publication with a particularly negative reaction to the festivities. *Action Française*’s complaints toward the event fell into two main categories: anti-Republican and anti-Semitic.

If the day’s activities fostered ties between Strasbourg and the Republic, as the other papers suggest, then it is no wonder that *Action Française* would disapprove. Though France had not had a king since 1848, the movement took a royalist stance and was thus antagonistic toward republicanism. After quoting part of Lebrun’s speech, the paper opined that the president neglected to add that “the Republic, founded on parties, living by their disputes, cannot do anything but maintain disorder in the city.”<sup>43</sup> On principle, they could not support the pro-republic tone of the day, but it would not be their sole reason for protest. The cosmopolitan symbolism and origin of the monument flew in the face of their competing vision of nationalism in France. Maurras espoused the theory of integral nationalism, a proto-fascist movement calling for the organization of all activities toward the glorification of the state. Followers of *Action Française* rallied against the elements within the state that they held to be destabilizing, lumped into four groups Maurras referred to as the ‘anti-France’: Foreigners, Freemasons, Protestants, and above all, Jews.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> *Action Française* (Paris) October 19, 1936. Gallica.

<sup>44</sup> The *AF* newspaper was in fact founded in 1899 in direct response to the Dreyfus Affair, defending the army for falsely convicting the Jewish military officer Alfred Dreyfus of treason.

As we have seen, the building of the *monument aux morts* happened to be spearheaded by Henry Lévy, the former deputy mayor of Strasbourg and a prominent member of the city's Jewish community. His prominence in the ceremony was seized upon by *Action Française*, which referred to the "shame of seeing a dirty Jew at the head of a nation of 38 million Catholics out of 40 million inhabitants."<sup>45</sup> The *AF* correspondent was incensed that Alsace could not produce a Christian to organize the erection of a monument to the war's dead. The article later claims that Lévy made a considerable profit in Deutschmarks by giving the Germans war loans, and that on top of that intimates that the wealthy miller was poisoning the people with his "chemical flour."<sup>46</sup> In a way, *Action Française's* negative reaction helps confirm the interpretation of the inauguration of the *monument aux morts* as both strengthening the relationship between Strasbourg and the nation-state and as presenting the identity of Strasbourg as a cosmopolitan, hybrid culture within the Republic. If it were not a threat to their image of what French society should be, they would not have been so antagonistic toward the spectacle. The unanimity among the rest of France's mainstream political spectrum in contrast to the one example of hostility shows the general success of the events within France in terms of accomplishing their purpose.

International newspapers made mention of Lebrun's visit to Strasbourg with differing emphases. The *London Times* included a brief paragraph about the ceremony two days later, merely focusing on the growth of Strasbourg's commerce as an inland port.<sup>47</sup> The *New York Times* emphasized Lebrun's appeal for peace with Germany, entitling their

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<sup>45</sup> *Action Française* (Paris), October 19, 1936. Gallica.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *The Times* (London), October 20, 1936. European Library.

article “German Friendship is Invited by Lebrun.”<sup>48</sup> The Germans, however were not placated by Lebrun’s words. The *Hamburger Anzeiger* criticizes Lebrun for neglecting to use his speech as an opportunity to excoriate the Communist Party, who had sparked a controversy the previous week when one of their leading members had made anti-German remarks in a rally.<sup>49</sup> The *Deutsches Nachrichtenbüro*, the official press agency of Nazi Germany, also seems concerned that the word “communism” was never said by any of the day’s speakers.<sup>50</sup> What this indicates is that in 1936, the priority for the Nazi Regime was the containment of communism and not irredentism. In fact, Tessier’s speech during the inauguration ceremony quoted an address by Hitler to the Reichstag from May 1935 where the Führer insisted that “the question of Alsace is settled and it is definitively settled.”<sup>51</sup> The prevailing thought in 1936 was that Alsace was an integral part of France.

## ALSATIAN SYMPATHIES

France, as we have seen, is a diverse nation with a multitude of viewpoints. Where did the people of Strasbourg lean politically and socially in the grand scheme of French politics? I have chosen to look at election results to gauge the contemporary political sensibilities of the Strasbourgeois for the sake of predicting how the common citizens would have responded to the monument’s unveiling and the speeches of the delegates. In the final analysis, the results of the Legislative Elections of April and May of 1936 show an Alsace that is certainly not in lockstep with the rest of France politically, which indicates

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<sup>48</sup> *New York Times*, October 19, 1936. NYT Archive.

<sup>49</sup> *Hamburger Anzeiger* (Hamburg), October 19, 1936. European Library.

<sup>50</sup> *Deutsches Nachrichtenbüro* (Berlin), October 19, 1936. European Library.

<sup>51</sup> *Le Temps* (Paris), October 19, 1936. Gallica.

that the success of the monument rested upon appealing to common republican values above and beyond their particular political differences.

While the majority of the nation voted for Popular Front parties such as the SFIO and Radicals, Alsace was a conservative stronghold in 1936. The idiosyncrasies of Alsace-Lorraine's re-entry into France after the war were a contributing factor to its political nonconformity. The French Republic had officially separated church and state in 1905, but the strongly Catholic departments of Alsace and the Moselle section of Lorraine were under German jurisdiction at this point. Upon their reintegration in 1918, the populace successfully resisted internal and external pressures to accept secularization.<sup>52</sup> To protect their religious and social interests, the Alsatians largely voted for center-right regionalist parties such as the Popular Republican Union (UPR).

Alsace also featured a groundswell of communist support, particularly in the industrial districts of Colmar and Strasbourg. Communists won three of the nine seats in the Bas-Rhin department in 1936, while neither Lebrun's Radical Party nor Léon Blum's SFIO took a single seat in Alsace. It is worth noting that the communist deputies from Alsace did not join the rest of the country's PCF delegates in caucusing with Blum's Popular Front coalition.

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<sup>52</sup> Alsace-Lorraine is still legally under the *Concordat* signed by Napoleon and Pius VII in 1801. They remain the only departments in France with confessional schools and state-subsidized clergy.



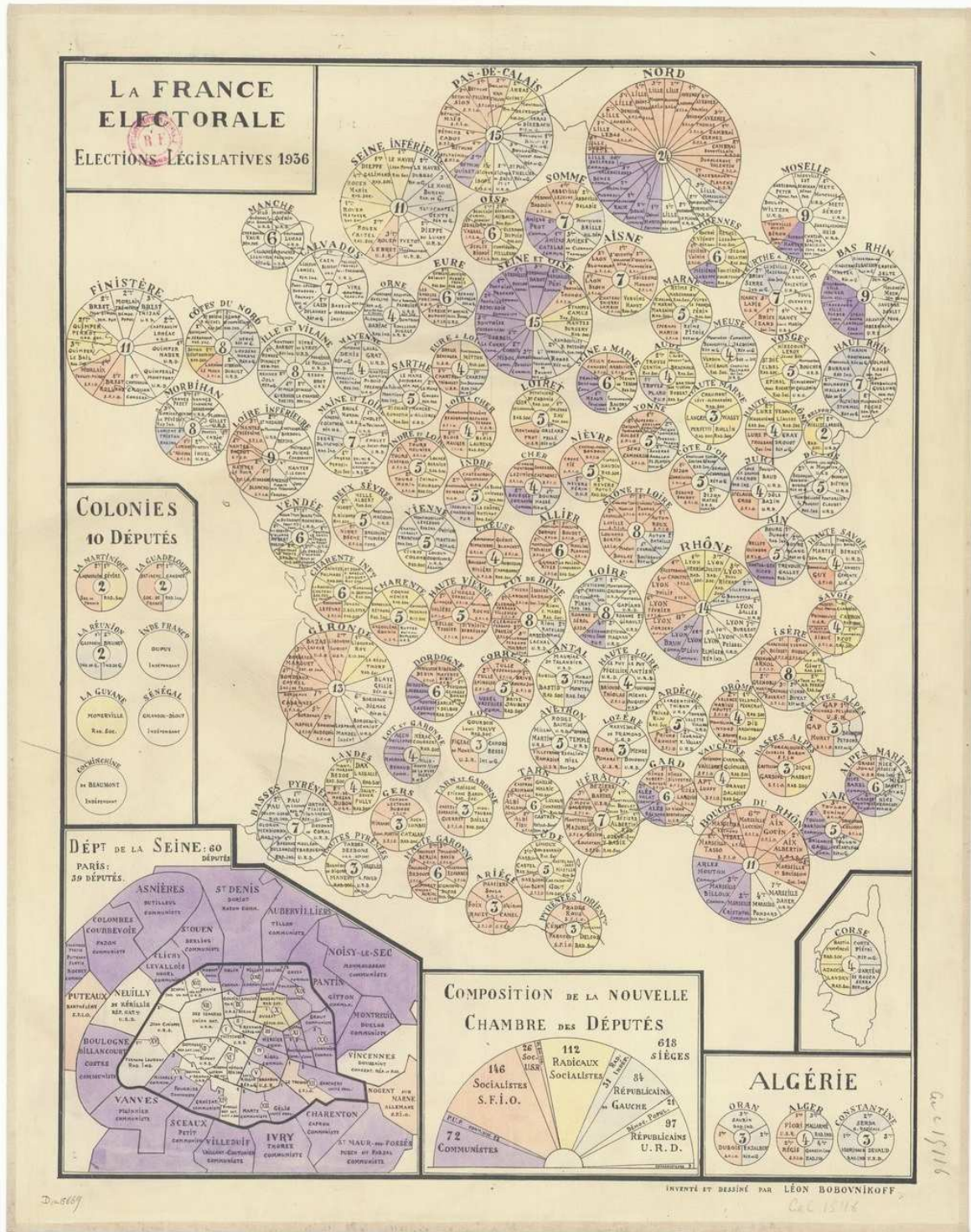


Fig. 10, 1936 Election Results: Colors of circles indicate parties of elected officials in departments. Note the Bas-Rhin and Haut-Rhin (east-northeast of map) as white or light blue (conservatives) and purple



(communists), with none of the red (SFIO) or yellow (Radical Party) that permeates the remainder of the map. Source: Gallica.

From these results we can deduce that the general sentiments of Strasbourgeois citizens in 1936 would be most closely aligned with the thoughts expressed in periodicals like *Le Matin* and most especially *Le Croix*. A significant amount of the urban working-class population would feel solidarity with *L'Humanité* despite the split among the national and Alsatian communist parties.

The spirit of national cooperation and the negotiated place of the region in the nation is evident if we see Strasbourg as consisting of regionalist conservatives and independent communists and see the Third Republic as centrist Radicals and Popular Front Socialists. The unanimous acclaim for the festivities in Strasbourg gives the impression that the ceremony of October 18<sup>th</sup> was a rousing success. In providing a satisfactory outcome for the entire political spectrum, apart from the fringe anti-republican far-right, the events serve as a point of reconciliation of regional and national interests around their shared values of republican patriotism.

## CONCLUSION/EPILOGUE

The presence of diverse religious and social representatives on the monument's committee and the acclaim for the day's events as expressed in newspapers across the political spectrum show us the breadth of inclusion in the city's republican identity. Efforts to include various social sectors in the construction and inauguration of the monument tells us who is, but perhaps just as importantly, who is not, a part of this union. Even if

much of Strasbourg had conservative leanings, the far-right leagues like Action Française had no place in a republican city.

The *monument aux morts* forged a lasting republican identity in Strasbourg that remains unshaken to this day. The temporary re-annexation of Alsace-Lorraine by Nazi Germany in the Second World War could not alter this self-understanding. Unlike previous conflicts between France and Germany, there was no doubt of Strasbourg's Frenchness when this war was settled in 1945. Nor could constitutional reform in France break this bond. Strasbourg and Alsace remained constituent parts of the nation through the constitutional crises which brought about the Fourth Republic in 1946 and the Fifth Republic in 1958. The Alsatians still retain their old political leanings, however, consistently voting for conservative parties in the national elections.<sup>53</sup>

As the events of October 1936 have shown, Strasbourg is a republican city. But we can also say that France is a republic shaped by the contributions of its constituent parts, not least of which is the region of Alsace. This working relationship and mutual understanding between the two was the result of a process of reconciliation, undertaken by the members of the monument committee, the national government, and the citizens of Strasbourg. What this dialectical process produced and codified through the aesthetic realm was a popular identity that is at once republican, French, and Alsatian.

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<sup>53</sup> Center-right candidates have carried majorities in the departments of Alsace since the current presidential structure came into being in 1958. They heavily supported de Gaulle, Giscard d'Estaing, Chirac, and Sarkozy. Bas-Rhin was one of the few constituencies to vote against the socialist François Mitterand in both of his presidential elections.

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